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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP

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CE, TH
SUBJECT: UAE'S HIGH PROFILE CAMPAIGN AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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Classified by Ambassador Richard Olson for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

11. (SBU) Summary. In the five months since the State Department released its annual trafficking in persons(TIP) country reports, the UAE government has taken highly visible steps to crack down on human trafficking through enhanced measures of prevention, protection, and prosecution. Immediate results include several recent arrests and convictions for trafficking offenses, a series of front-page newspaper articles detailing the government's anti-trafficking and victim protection efforts, and the UAE's eighth bilateral TIP agreement, in this case with Thailand, to prevent source country labor recruitment abuses. End Summary.

UAE Interagency Coordination on TIP

12. (SBU) The UAE National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (NCCHT) was established in 2007 and includes representatives from the Ministries of Labor, Justice, Interior, Social Affairs, Health, Foreign Affairs, and FNC Affairs, as well as State Security, the Red Crescent Authority, and TIP victims shelters. Although a federal body, the committee has authority to coordinate anti-trafficking programs across all levels of government in all seven emirates. New programs are most visible in Dubai, where human trafficking is the most prevalent due to the role of foreign laborers in the construction and the service industries and the city's position as a regional transportation hub.

Dubai Seeks Victim Protection, Criminal Prosecution

13. (SBU) In October, the Dubai Attorney General announced the creation of a permanent task force to handle human trafficking cases (septel). The task force is charged not just to investigate and prosecute TIP cases, but also focus on victim support. To that end, the task force will include social workers and mental health professionals, in addition to female investigators assigned to cases involving female victims. It is unclear whether the NCCHT had a hand in the creation of the Dubai task force, but NCCHT Chairman Dr. Anwar Gargash praised Dubai authorities in the press for their efforts and discussed strategic coordination between the federal and local entities.

14. (SBU) As of mid-October, Dubai authorities had brought 17 human trafficking cases to court in 2009, compared to only 11 reported prosecutions and convictions nationwide in 2008. In at least two separate instances, Dubai prosecutors applied the human trafficking law in sexual assault cases where it was alleged that the perpetrators sought to force the victims into prostitution. In August, Dubai criminal courts handed down five-year prison sentences to three individuals convicted of trafficking for prostitution a woman who was held captive for one day.

Private Sector's Role in Trafficking Prevention

15. (C) As in many Gulf countries reliant on foreign laborers, the UAE has a sponsorship law open to potential abuse by human traffickers. The NCCHT is improving victim support through quasi-private shelters and expanded Red Crescent services. However, two significant amendments to the UAE labor law could fundamentally alter the dynamics of employment sponsorship and make mass trafficking of laborers much more difficult. One of these changes has already taken effect; the other is expected in 2010.

16. (SBU) The first program is a public-private partnership that guarantees electronic deposit of wages for foreign laborers. Direct deposits are intended to prevent abuse of the sponsorship system by establishing a record of direct payment of wages. An estimated 500,000 workers will be paid in this manner by the end of 2009. All companies registered with the Ministry of Labor will be required to utilize the electronic payment system by May 2010. The UAEG's "wage protection system" has experienced some early technical difficulties; however, Minister of Labor Saqr bin Ghobash Saeed Ghobash told a group of business leaders in Abu Dhabi October 27 that there were no plans to extend the May 2010 deadline.

17. (C) A second, even farther reaching amendment to the UAE labor law anticipated in 2010 would allow laborers to freely change employment after a certain period of time in the UAE. Minister Ghobash (protect) told the Ambassador privately that the change has government approval but has not been announced publicly. Ghobash admitted that this was an issue of great sensitivity for the UAE private sector, and the government needed to prepare major employers for the change. The creation of a large pool of essentially "free agent" laborers could improve working conditions generally and

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diminish trafficking of laborers who have no recourse when forced into bonded labor.

UAE Expands International TIP Cooperation

18. (SBU) The UAEG arranged for anti-trafficking experts from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to visit the country earlier this year to train law enforcement officials and NGO representatives how to identify trafficked persons and traffickers and how to interview potential victims. The government also invited the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons to visit the country.

19. (SBU) The UAEG now has bilateral agreements with eight labor exporting countries: India, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, China, and Thailand. The agreements vary in content but share the intent of involving government labor ministries in the contracting of laborers as a means of undermining illegitimate private recruiting agencies. At least four source countries now have a minimum wage standard that must be incorporated into legal contracts involving their nationals working in the UAE.

110. (SBU) Comment. When the USG's annual TIP report downgraded the UAE to the Tier II watchlist earlier this year, the government's reaction was unsurprisingly negative. In the five months since, we have been encouraged by the significant efforts undertaken by the Ministry of Labor, the NCCHT, and local entities to foster an integrated anti-trafficking strategy. End Comment.

OLSON